

## WILLIAM WITHERING (1741-1799) AND EDGBASTON HALL

BY

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Edgbaston Hall, once the home of William Withering, and now the club house of the Edgbaston Golf Club, was the venue of the annual dinner of the Cardiac Society of Great Britain and Ireland for the Birmingham meeting in May 1939.

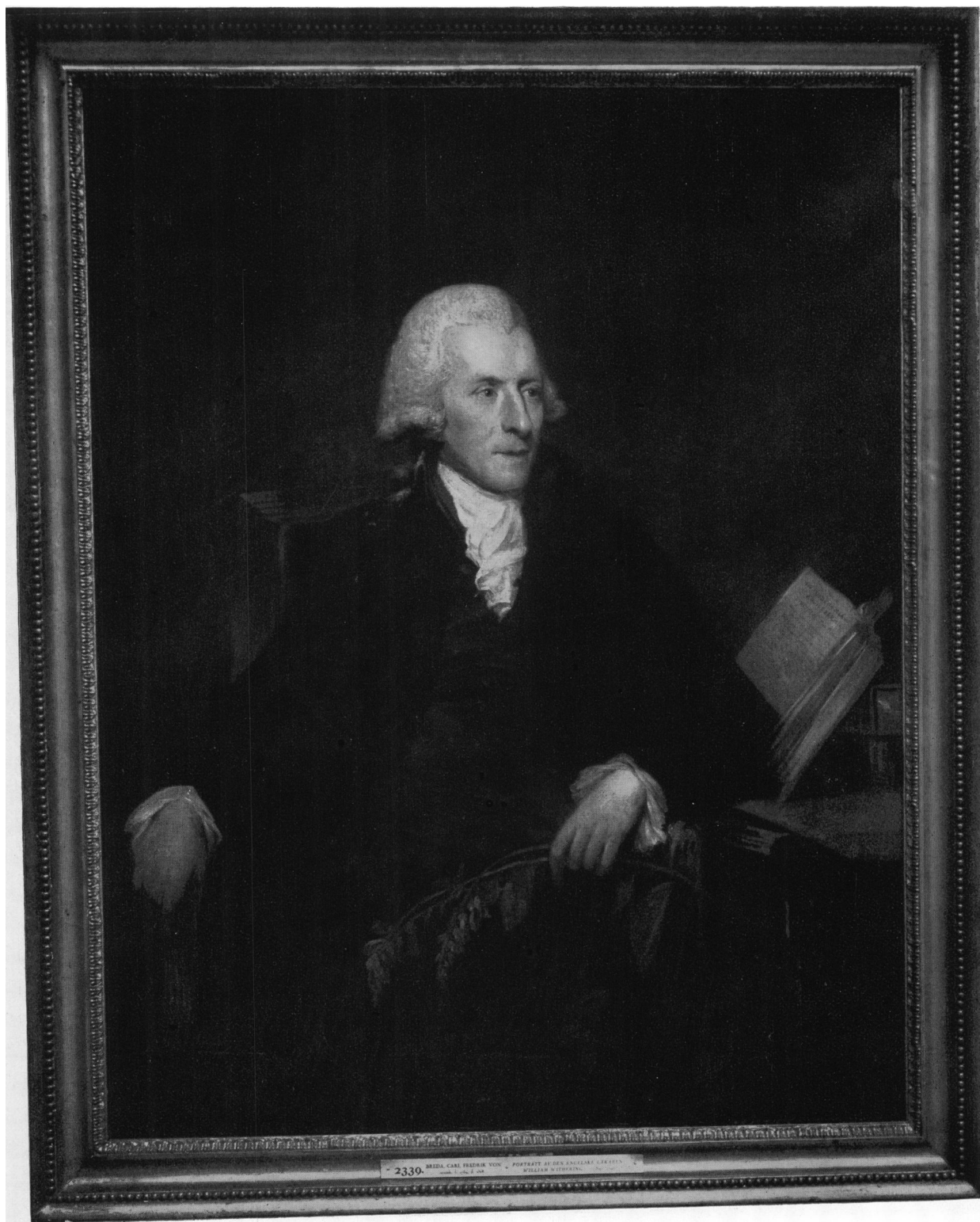
The estate is a very old one, and the present house has some close medical associations. The Manor of Edgbaston dates back to the Norman Conquest, when it was valued at thirty shillings a year; and in the reign of King Richard the second, through the marriage of Isabella de Egebaston to Thomas Middlemore, the estate passed to the Middlemores, with whom it remained for more than three hundred years. The Middlemores were an important Roman Catholic family in the Midlands, with very large estates of which the present Duke of Norfolk is co-heir. In 1635, as Roman Catholics, they forfeited their Edgbaston estates, but managed to obtain a forty years lease from the Crown on the payment of one hundred pounds a year. The size of Edgbaston Hall at this time may be judged from the fact that it paid hearth tax on twenty-two hearths.

During the Civil War, the Hall was held for Parliament by the notorious Colonel Fox, who maintained a garrison there for three years. He did so much damage that it was not again inhabited. In 1680, the Hall was dismantled, with the excuse of preventing it acting any longer as a refuge for Papists, and in 1717 the estate was sold to Sir Richard Gough, and shortly afterwards the Hall as it now stands was constructed. An illustration is shown on the next page.

William Withering obtained a fourteen years lease of the Hall and park in January 1786, at an annual rental of two hundred and thirty-seven pounds ten shillings. The lease also states that "he is to replace any sweet carp or tench removed from the pool, is not to dig, plough, break up, or convert into tillage, any part of the estate, under penalty; nor to plant flax seed, rape seed, wood madder, or potatoes, but he is to maintain the wheat crop."

In 1791, Birmingham had most serious riots, fomented by rival religious parties, but based upon political unrest and feelings against Dr. J. Priestley and others who approved the French Revolution. Edgbaston Hall was attacked, but escaped serious damage, being more fortunate than many of the mansions round the city. Withering was neither a non-conformist nor a





sympathizer with the Revolution, but any house that appeared worth looting was subject to attack, and he was known as a friend of Priestley.

It was at Edgbaston Hall that Withering maintained a botanical garden, and bred cattle and dogs—the cattle breeding was so successful that it paid his rents—and there he met and entertained many of the leading scientists and botanists of his time, for he had a European reputation not only as a physician, but also as a botanist and as a chemist. Shortly before he died in 1799, Withering left the Hall for a milder climate in Sparkbrook, but he only lived at “The Larches” for a week, for he moved on September 28, 1799, and died about 7 p.m. on October 6, aged fifty-eight years and six months.

He was buried in Edgbaston Church on October 10 and there still stands the mural monument with the representations of *digitalis* and the *Witheringia*.

In the inscription, he is said to have been born on March 28, 1741, but his son in the memoirs says that he was born on March 17, 1741; probably March 28 was the baptismal date.

To-day in the garden and grounds of the Hall there are still blooms of foxglove—descendants of those plants that Withering himself cultivated—and that surely is the best memorial to his memory.

EXTRACT FROM THE MINUTES OF THE THIRD ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF  
THE CARDIAC SOCIETY, HELD AT BIRMINGHAM ON THURSDAY, MAY 25, 1939.

CHAIRMAN: K. D. WILKINSON.

Dinner was held at the Edgbaston Golf Club (Withering's old house), and the Society admired the fine portrait of Withering, lent by the Chairman to look down on the Society from the walls of his old dwelling-house. The original painting, of which this was an excellent copy, was by Carl von Breda and was bought for the Stockholm gallery where it hangs with this inscription :—

2339 BREDÅ, CARL FREDRIK VON,  
svensk, f.1759, d.1818.  
PORTRÄTT ÅU DEN ENGELSKE LÅKAREN  
WILLIAM WITHERING. sign. 1792.

[A photograph of this is shown on the previous page.]

John Hay, in his usual felicitous manner, proposed the health of the Society, coupled with the name of the Chairman. The Chairman (Wilkinson) replied with a charming sketch of some aspects of Withering's life and work, and proposed the health of the Secretary. The Secretary replied shortly.

John Parkinson

9th May, 1940